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Week of
January 18, 1943

New York

THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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†"Nine Girls" opened Wednesday, January 14th, at the Longacre Theatre.
†"Dark Eyes" opened Thursday, January 15th, at the Belasco Theatre.

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Theater Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

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"Dark Eyes"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
January 15, 1943

Actresses as Authors

By HOWARD BARNES

A COUPLE of Russian actresses have written a play about something close to their hearts in "Dark Eyes." They have celebrated the tribulations of a couple of Russian actresses, trying to get a play produced on Broadway. At times Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich have whipped up interludes of infectious and sustained gayety at the Belasco. Unfortunately they have mixed the moods of their travesty in such an off hand manner that it has a tendency to sag badly when it should be hitting high spots of hilarity.

• • •

Essentially "Dark Eyes" is a satire on racial temperament, with Yankee foibles coming in for quite as much spoofing as Slavic eccentricities. Under the crafty manipulations of Jed Harris, who has been too long absent from the theater, the script affords a rich fund of laughter in several scenes, particularly since the authors are on hand to interpret their choicest passages. So long as the Russian actresses are avoiding a bouncing check and needling a business man into backing their play, it is first-rate farce. When a suicide pact is dragged into the plot, for no apparent reason, there is little to recommend the proceedings.

• • •

There could scarcely have been a better treatment of the material at hand. Both in his production and his staging Harris has lavished his brilliant showmanship on "Dark Eyes." He has assembled an excellent cast, with Ludmilla Toretzka and Geza Korvin supplementing the authors' efforts in the portrayal of Russian types; Jay Fassett, Carl Gose, Anne Burr and Minnie Dupree making admirable foils for their fits of temperament as rather bewildered Long Islanders. There are also Oscar Polk and Maude Russell, playing a pair of genial darky servants with superb effect.

• • •

Staging and acting are just not enough to pull off a high comedy. The Misses Leontovich and Miramova should have written better for themselves in the Belasco presentation. When they have invented situations and lines which match their burlesque performances, there can never be any quarrel with "Dark Eyes." When they have merely contrived scenes in which they are able to pull off some acting pyrotechnics, the play is definitely disappointing. It might be noted, as a sort of postscript, that the Stewart Chaney settings are handsome and give full scope for the fluent Harris staging.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
January 15, 1943

Vodka in Martinis Is a Bad Idea

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

TWO Russian-American actresses have written a farce about three Russian-American actresses, and have further obliged by portraying two-thirds of the Russian-American actresses they have written about. Lest this confuse you, let me report that Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich, both as playwrights and performers, have wildly spoofed the more vulnerable aspects of the Russian artistic temperament and the Russian soul. Right now the old idea of voluble and excitable Russian natures that are gaily penurious, madly romantic and militantly suicidal is pretty well obscured by a Russian courage that makes headlines and a Russian determination that makes history. *Dark Eyes*, however, is an innocent enough lark; unfortunately, it is not quite an entertaining enough play.

It has its funny moments, this yarn of three high-and-dry Russian *artistes* who have passed a rubber check and written a play, and who fling themselves hopefully upon a rich and goggle-eyed Long Island family. With their capacity for self-dramatization, their love of gestures, their ideas about sex, and their inability to let well enough alone, they are one minute in the chips and the next minute out of luck, and they quaff poison as nonchalantly as they stow away martinis made with vodka.

• • •

With Jed Harris offering some spirited direction, and Mmes. Leontovich and Miramova —along with Ludmilla Toretzka and Jay Fassett—providing some capable performances, *Dark Eyes* does all it can to stretch an idea into an evening. But it doesnt' succeed. Russian artistic temperament can be funny enough when burlesqued in short doses, but extended through an entire play the thing seems badly overworked. One tires of wackiness that harps on one note; long before the end one sighs for the assorted mahias of a *You Can't Take It With You*. Furthermore, even though the point of the joke is that these Russian ladies talk too much and emote too much and flare up too much, that doesn't save the joke itself from becoming exhausting rather than exhilarating. A farce that, more than anything else, makes you long for peace and quiet somehow isn't hitting just the right note.

Beyond all this, the sorry truth is that Mmes. Miramova and Leontovich are much better actresses than they are playwrights. *Dark Eyes* is pretty spotty and often pretty forced. Its spoofing needs more wit, as well as more variety. The lady authors must have had a whale of a good time writing the play and turning the laughs inwardly upon themselves. But, as usually happens in such a case, the laughs are too often pointed in the wrong direction.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
January 15, 1943

Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich Star in Own Hilarious Comedy

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH there used to be an old Broadway saying that if you scratched a Russian you would find Jed Harris, times changed and reports went out that Mr. Harris had combed the last Cossack out of his beard.

At the Belasco last night this proved fortunately untrue, for Mr. Harris has brought to town a gay, foolish, amiably absurd and somehow gallant and beguiling comedy called "Dark Eyes" by, with, and about a couple of eminent Russian actresses who, finding themselves unemployed, write a play about themselves. Any resemblance, I suppose, to persons in real life is just so much whipped cream of the jest.

The comedy was written by Elena Miramova in collaboration with Eugenie Leontovich, and most playgoers will recognize at once two players identified with "Grand Hotel." Miss Leontovich played the Russian dancer in that play here, and was succeeded by Miss Miramova, who later achieved the same success in the role in London.

Rescued by Prince

Since then there has not been so much to report about them, which is where "Dark Eyes" comes in, perhaps if it is not taken too literally. It begins with some Russian actresses rescued from a poverty-stricken bench in Central Park by a Georgian prince, who takes them to Long Island for what the prince erroneously thinks is a weekend at the home of his wealthy fiancee.

Thereupon the staid Long Island household reels under the joint impact of Russians and actresses. They minister gently to the head of the house, a tired tycoon, resting between bouts at Washington; they fete grandma on her birthday, with costumes, dances, and little presents; they bedazzle the young son, captivate the servants, and then, in the most innocent method they can contrive, they lure father into backing their play, with a down payment of $500 which they need desperately if they are to stay out of jail.

The authors are shrewd enough, however, to lay less emphasis on the slender tale than on its emotional trimmings, on the fireworks any Muscovite presumably will send up at any moment and on the ridiculous situations they provoke to the delight and terror of the American household.

These unexpected scenes of emotional violence are the funniest parts of "Dark Eyes." The ladies, for instance, are going upstairs grandly to dress when they get into an hilarious brawl over the merits of Tschaikovsky. One of them sings what Balieff used to call "a sad sonk," and the prince, accepting its reference to an old love affair, breaks his champagne glass.

Suicide Scene

Ultimately two of them convince themselves that their host would not back their play unless he had some amorous designs, so they tell him they cannot take his money. When he explains with embarrassment that he had no such intentions they are furious because he hasn't, and agreed to commit suicide. They solemnly drink some stuff out of a gold bottle and then, just as they regret they are dying, because things look better, they discover it was only peach brandy.

The Misses Miramova and Leontovich have written these mercurial and flamboyant incidents down with high relish and good humor. They may be true about Russians, true about actors, and not really true about anybody, but they do capture the quicksilver moods of tragedy and farce, of romantic nonsense and fierce reality. They are wild, funny, sad, cock-eyed, and practical which, at the Belasco, is another way of saying that if you scratch a Russian grease paint will ooze out.

Sardonic Humor

The two authors have given themselves a field day, and they play from everything except the chandelier. Miss Miramova is immensely amusing as the more sentimental Tonia, and Miss Leontovich performs with a dry, sardonic, and sharply inflected humor that is irresistible.

Under Mr. Harris's exuberant direction the others keep the play simmering and chuckling, notably Jay Fassett as the solid Long Islander, Ludmilla Toretzka as an embattled Russian star who hates Tschaikovsky, Geza Korvin as the Georgian prince, Oscar Polk as an imperturbable butler, Minnie Dupree as the grandmother, and Carl Gose as the smitten American youth.

Stewart Chaney has provided a couple of opulent Long Island settings and in spite of an uncertain beginning, and a few weak spots, the final effect is amusing and pleasantly delirious. If there is any party line in the play, it seems to run directly through the funny-bone, which is a good place for any party.

"Dark Eyes"

NEW YORK SUN
January 15, 1943

'Dark Eyes,' a Small, Pleasant Comedy, Is Offered at the Belasco

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

"DARK EYES," which opened at the Belasco last evening, is a small but frisky comedy which, while certainly not notable for anything in particular, is entirely good-humored and generally rather engaging. It is also, fortunately, very well acted by Eugenie Leontovich, Elena Miramova, Jay Fassett and several other skillful people, prominently including Oscar Polk.

It was written by Miss Miramova, in collaboration with Miss Leontovich, and quite evidently for the disarming purpose of giving Miss Miramova and Miss Leontovich parts which fit them like gloves. They have provided that they shall be, in their play as in life, accomplished Russian actresses. In the play, as probably not often in life, they descend on an unsuspecting American family and shatter its placidity with fine outbursts of Russian temperament. They are aided in creating turmoil by Ludmilla Toretzka, who is as amusing as they are.

This is the situation. There is very little tangible plot. The ladies entertain grandma with songs and dances; they get money to put on a play from a puzzled, but amiable, business man; they soothe the son of the family when the air force turns him down; tempestuously they accept and reject love, even when it is not offered. They soar and plunge to the depths; they are ecstatic and they try to commit suicide by drinking peach brandy. Miss Miramova says that this is Russian behavior, and certainly she ought to know.

I doubt if any of these little situations, or the dialogue which accompanies them, are essentially as entertaining as the clever people on the Belasco stage make them appear. The dialogue is more often spirited than witty; much of the fun comes from the instantaneous changes of mood. And the heartiest laugh of all comes when Mr. Polk, looking in on ladies presumably in their death agonies, politely inquires if he may take this opportunity to thank them for the gift of a very nice tie. For the most part, "Dark Eyes" demands an appreciative smile more often than outright laughter.

But it is always light and pleasant fooling, getting its fun out of twists of character, and for the most part it is oddly refreshing. Miss Leontovich is particularly delightful in her headlong, appreciative dash through a variety of emotions; Miss Miramova is more gently amusing; Miss Toretzka is heartily, comically downright. Mr. Fassett is a perfect foil for these dashing creatures, baffled and surprised. Anne Burr is a little left out of things, not being Russian; Geza Korvin pops in and out as a man disputed; Minnie Dupree plays gently and touchingly and Carl Gose wanders happily through the wispy plot. And there is also Mr. Polk, never to be forgotten.

A compilation of amusing little touches, "Dark Eyes" is.

'DARK EYES'

A comedy in two acts by Elena Miramova, in collaboration with Eugenie Leontovich; settings by Stewart Chaney; staged and presented at the Belasco Theater on January 14, 1943, by Jed Harris.

The cast:

Larry Field	Carl Gose
Willoughby	Oscar Polk
Grandmother Field	Minnie Dupree
Pearl	Maude Russell
Helen Field	Anne Burr
Prince Nicolai Toradje	Geza Korvin
Natasha Rapakovitch	Eugenie Leontovich
Tonia Karpova	Elena Miramova
Olga Shmilevskaya	Ludmilla Toretzka
John Fields	Jay Fassett

NEW YORK TIMES
January 15, 1943

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Dark Eyes"

By LEWIS NICHOLS

THERE appears to be a second Russian front in the theatre district this Winter. First came "The Three Sisters," or one mood; then came "The Russian People" as a story of a people's fight against Hitler. Finally, last evening, Jed Harris brought to the Belasco the play called "Dark Eyes," to complete the cycle with a comedy about Russian expatriates on a fabulous visit to Long Island. Mr. Harris did more, for he brought to the Forties a very engaging, entertaining and charming play that is beautifully directed and acted to the last line that is in it.

* * *

"Dark Eyes" is the work of Elena Miramova, in collaboration with Eugenia Leontovich, and lurking in the background are such Russian students as Nunnally Johnson and Mr. Harris, with an earlier legend naming Ben Hecht as well. Whoever they all were, they knew what they were doing, with Miss Miramova and Miss Leontovich acting two of the roles as only authors can play parts they have written about people they know. For into "Dark Eyes" they have poured comedy and accents, misunderstandings and a moving quality of great good cheer, sentiment and also laughter—at times, all these at once.

* * *

Their story is of three Russians who have written a play—it probably could even be "Dark Eyes"—and who also have written a check on a bank in which they have no funds. A friend of theirs takes them to the Long Island home of his fiancée, whose father has just returned from the Washington wars and wants peace in the house. That is the one thing he does not get, for Russians in Long Island houses are flamboyant, life being a series of crises touching alike the top of the world and the bottom of the lower depths. And there are quotations from Russian poets to fit either mood.

While sometimes the story seems to rest for a few moments before proceeding, the acting never does. It goes on at feverish pitch, with the two authors and Ludmilla Toretzka, as the third of the trio, turning in marvelous performances. Miss Leontovich is the lovely one who stirs up most of the misunderstandings, and Miss Miramova is more a prober into the soul. Miss Toretzka, dumpy and practical, will take things as they come, without brooding although fierce in battle. "Dark Eyes" has two moments in which all three take part which are as funny as any moments on Broadway—a serious discussion of Russian silences and an argument about the music of Tchaikovsky.

* * *

Nor do the other members of the cast simply walk across the stage. Jay Fassett does an excellent job as the Long Islander who, worn out with Washington, returns home only to be met by the Russian invasion. Minnie Dupree, as the kindly mother and grandmother, gives another of her better performances, and there is a good portrait of a Russian prince—who decides finally to return home and fight—by Geza Korvin. Oscar Polk, who practically created the shambling walk, is back with it as amusingly as ever. In directing, Mr. Harris has followed his old scheme: no waste motion but plenty of motion. Dark eyes definitely are twinkling.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
January 15, 1943

There Is Fun in "Dark Eyes," But It's a Little Hard to Get

"Dark Eyes," a comedy by Elena Miramova, in collaboration with Eugenie Leontovich. Produced by Jed Harris at the Belasco Theatre, New York, Jan. 14, 1943.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

ONCE upon a time there were three Russians. Natasha, Tonia and Olga.

They were actresses and they wanted to act. So two of them wrote a play in which all three could appear.

They may not have called the play "Dark Eyes," but the story of "Dark Eyes," which opened at the Belasco last night, is the story of Natasha, Tonia and Olga, and the play they wrote.

Now one Russian in a play is usually delightful. His or her accent is interesting, even piquant. A stage filled with Russians, speaking Russian, is an adventure and frequently exciting.

But three Russians in a play, all speaking English with accents and all important to the story and its telling, are a bit confusing. Especially in speech.

At least last night they were confusing to me, even though they were splendidly characterized and acted with spirit and charm by Eugenie Leontovich, Elena Miramova and Ludmilla Toretzka.

Good for Pictures

I have an idea that when they get to the screen, as they are pretty sure to do with Jed Harris and 20th Century-Fox back of them, they will provide material for an amusing frolic. The Hays boys may censor a few of the Americanisms in which the girls take special delight, but that will not hurt them much.

"Dark Eyes," as I get it, was Miss Miramova's idea. Miss Leontovich was called in to work with it, perhaps because she could rely on her husband's, Gregory Ratoff's, friendly and excited assistance.

The story is of the three refugees who are broke in New York.

In their dilemma they write a check on a bank in which they have no funds, as comic plot builders have been doing these many years, and then worry for fear they are being sought by the local OGPU.

On the Island

When a Russian friend invites them to spend a few days at the home of his Long Island fiance they accept with alacrity. There they are somewhat flustered by the discovery of a gentleman who is willing to back their play without the slightest thought of changing the sleeping arrangement of even the prettiest of them.

A good, workable idea for a character comedy weakened, it may be, by too much fussing with it. Good individual scenes and a happy conclusion.

The authors, Miss Leontovich and Miss Miramova, enjoy themselves heartily. Jay Fassett is a help as the surprised angel. Ann Burr plays a heavy ingenue, Geza Korvin is the fiance. Minnie Dupree, Carl Gose and Oscar Polk score with short parts and few chances.

Stewart Chaney has furnished two nice interiors, and Jed Harris did the directing. He keeps the story moving and frequently points the action cleverly.

"Dark Eyes"

NEW YORK POST
January 15, 1943

Jed Harris Returns to Broadway With a New Comedy, "Dark Eyes"

By WILELLA WALDORF

ELENA MIRAMOVA and Eugenie Leontovich, a couple of Russian actresses, have written a comedy entitled "Dark Eyes," about a couple of Russian actresses trying to find a backer for their play about a couple of Russian actresses. It was produced by the too-long-absent Jed Harris last night at the Belasco Theatre, and turned out to be something different as Broadway comedies come and go these days.

"Dark Eyes" begins in rather halting, stilted fashion and it is some time before its charm percolates into the audience. The authors, being Russian themselves, have a great respect and admiration for the Russian temperament, but they have been in this country long enough to realize that there are many things about it that strike Americans as ridiculous.

They manage to generate a remarkable number of laughs by kidding themselves and their compatriots in good-natured fashion, exhibiting a mixture of sophistication and naivete that becomes increasingly beguiling as the evening goes on.

The Uninvited Guests

Having been evicted from their New York flat for non-payment of rent, the actress-playwrights, Natasha Rapakovitch and Tonia Karpova, accompanied by their friend Olga Shmilevskaya, the erstwhile opera singer, haughtily hand the landlord a check for $500 and sleep in the park until their countryman, Prince Nicolai Toradje, invites them to accompany him on a visit to the Field family on Long Island.

The Prince hopes to marry into the family and is quite sure that his future in-laws will be delighted to receive the ladies and all of their baggage, including the works of Dostoievsky and a samovar. It was necessary to bring the samovar because Dostoievsky must be read with a glass of Russian tea.

Mr. Field has just returned from an exasperating trip to Washington and is in no mood for entertaining anybody, but he gradually falls under the spell of his Russian guests, who are not too depressed to sing and dance for Grandma Field on her birthday, although they have discovered from the Prince that it is illegal to hand out checks for $500 when there is no money in the bank.

The tricky business of inducing Mr. Field to back their play becomes genuinely hilarious as the performance progresses, the mood alternating between extreme ecstasy and profound despair, interspersed with intervals of analytical discussion on various abstract subjects.

As Tonia puts it, "We analyze our small talk and it becomes big talk."

Those Beguiling Russians

Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich are obviously enjoying themselves in this little charade, which manages somehow to catch the gallantry and proud spirit of the Russian character without waxing overly sentimental or playing too freely on the fact that America and Russia are now Allies and that the Russians are apparently knocking the tar out of our mutual enemy in the Caucasus.

In addition to the charming accents; the artful, and artless, comedy of the two authors, there are amusing performances by Ludmilla Toretzka as the opera singer who likes to cook, by Carl Gose as a young man who drinks too much, and by Jay Fassett as the nice American business man, Mr. Field, who doesn't mind backing a play even though its authors explain earnestly that they are not quite sure whether it's "commercial" or not.

Every inspired work, they believe, is bound to be successful some time, even though it may have to wait a century or so for recognition.

"Dark Eyes" may not be every theatre-goer's glass of tea. Some people, no doubt, prefer something a little stronger when it comes to refreshment, but for connoisseurs who like to take it slowly and inhale a rather rare savor, this comedy is recommended as something different and decidedly pleasant in Broadway entertainment. It grows on you.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
January 15, 1943

Dark Eyes Is Smash Hit; Comedy Wins Many Laughs

By BURTON RASCOE

A COUPLE of Russian-born actresses, Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich, certainly made monkeys out of most of the native-born farce writers at the Belasco last night with a smash hit called Dark Eyes. They not only wrote this delicious comedy, but acted in it, and if there are any better actresses than they and their pal in the play, Ludmilla Toretzka, when it comes to comic realism, I wish somebody would trot them out and put them through their paces in a comedy even half as good as this one.

Remembering the bitter feud that is now raging between those who are nuts about The Skin of Our Teeth and those who can't see it for dust and want to fight anybody that sees any humor in it, I suppose I should allow for a possible contingent of Dark Eyes-haters; but for the life of me I can't imagine what sort of persons they might be. Unless, of course, they would be slavish followers of the Communist party line who might object to a play in which there are Orthodox Russians who commit the sacrilege (to a Communist) of believing in God and crossing themselves on occasions when they would instinctively do so, and in which there is a ci-devant Russian prince who happens to be handsome, charming, cultivated and decent, though unemployed, a parasite and broke.

Come to think of it, I remember that back in the days when the Popular Front was Humpty Dumpty sitting pretty on the wall, there were a number of intellectuals, now busily preserving their cushy jobs (many of them governmental) by denying their Communist affiliations, who not only saw nothing amusing in Tovarich but also bitterly denounced it as, of all things, White-Russian propaganda! Dark Eyes is incomparably more laugh-provoking than Tovarich, but it is reasonable to expect that it may not appeal to ardent Stalinists and they may put on a campaign against it.

* * *

Drowned Out by Laughs

The audience simply guffawed with laughter last night, almost continuously—so much so, in fact, that quite a number of lines were drowned out and several times the actors had to hold their lines a little awkwardly until they could be heard.

The play is about three Russian females who have landed on these shores as refugees, not immediately from Russia, because they are actresses, but from Paris. They would be, I take it, White Russians or at least Mensheviks, Kereskyists, Trotskyites or Leninists—all of whom were indiscriminately liquidated by Stalin or hounded out of Russia. But in this play Russia is still their beloved Russia and there are several touching illusions (greatly cheered) to the unconquerable Russian spirit, now so heroically asserting itself on the Stalingrad and other Russian fronts. Whether they be White Russians or not, the Russian women, as portrayed in this comedy, go far toward explaining why the Russians are conquering against great odds.

* * *

Give Bad Check

The women have been evicted by their landlord because they were five months behind with the rent, but, not yet being thoroughly versed in American ways, they had given the landlord, on parting, a check for $500 against a bank at which they no longer have an account. Prince Nicolai, greatly agitated when he hears of this, explains our peculiar banking customs, which he has had to learn by painful experience. He says a check which merely bounces back because you haven't sufficient funds in the bank annoys the person to whom you gave the check, but to give a check against a bank in which you have no account at all is a matter in which the FBI takes an interest.

But these Russian refugees stick together, so when Prince Nicolai is invited to spend a week end at the country home of the WAAC to whom he is engaged, he in turn invites the three homeless females to show up there shortly after he does, hoping he can square it with his fiancee and assure free food and lodging for his friends until something turns up to improve their situation. The father of the fiancee is a manufacturer who, in sincere patriotism, has offered to the government his factory for the production of war material and as a result has been fingerprinted, investigated by the FBI, summoned to appear before a Senate committee, given the run-around by dozens of bureaucratic clerks and required to fill out bales of questionnaires without getting to first base in Washington. He is looking forward to a quiet week end in the country.

Instead he finds his house filled with Russians, each with a different idea about how to ingratiate themselves with an unwilling host.

Tonia is dreamy, pious and a virgin; Natasha is fiery, temperamental, worldy-wise and the former mistress of Prince Nicolai, and Olga is a massive mastodon of a woman with a positive peasant-like force of opinion. Through three hilarious scenes they try to make themselves welcome by every means, from that of giving a Russian birthday surprise party to Grandmother Fields to debating the question among themselves as to whether Tonia should give herself to the widowed manufacturer in gratitude for his promise to Tonia to back a play the girls have written.

* * *

Stopped by Conscience

Tonia and Natasha assume that is what Mr. Fields expected in payment, but when Tonia's religious conscience deters her, they call Mr. Fields into their bedroom to tell him why Tonia can't go through with it. Mr. Fields, whose motives are pure, can't be made to understand what it is that Tonia "can't go through with." After he leaves, Olga deduces "the man has only exercised his God-given American right not to go to bed with a woman if he doesn't want to," which causes Tonia to think she is undesirable. Tonia and Natasha conclude the jig is up and they will be jailed on account of the bad check. They resolve upon suicide, and bravely drink what they believe is a stiff dose of poison. While the whole household is trying to save the girls from the effects of the supposed poison, Oscar Polk, as the Negro butler who brings the egg yolks, convulses the audience by saying to the stricken girls, "Ladies, may I take this occasion to thank you for the beautiful tie you gave me?"

When the uproar has subsided Tonia and Mr. Fields find they are in love; Prince Nicolai has gone to fight for Russia for a reason Miss Fields does not suspect, and she is about to become a stepdaughter with three Russian women on her hands. I dare the authors to go on from there and write another comedy about that situation.

Although the interest is largely centered upon the three principal characters, the whole cast is wonderfully good. Geza Korvin is a distinct find, who recently had his first chance on the New York stage in the New School's production of Winter Soldier.

The veteran Minnie Dupree was, as usual, utterly charming. Ann Burr is lovely to look at, especially in profile, and projected her role with neatness and grace. Jay Fassett was excellent at the appealingly naif capitalist, and Carl Gose and Maude Russell round out the cast with their agreeable presence.

"Nine Girls"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
January 14, 1943

Sorority Girls Flop at Murder

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

PLAYS with all-women casts are becoming a Broadway habit. Less than a month ago the Shuberts all too briefly offered *Cry Havoc*, a play about nurses on Bataan; and Wednesday night Al Woods came out of retirement to produce a murder melodrama laid in a sorority house. This second venture, I am afraid, holds no more promise than the first one did. Despite a few interesting moments, *Nine Girls* is confused and unconvincing in the crucial matter of characterization, is inexpert in its stagecraft, and utterly commonplace in its writing.

The play deals with a girl who accidentally kills her rival in love, whom she bitterly hates; and who, because no one would believe the killing was an accident, tries to cover it up and is driven to wade ever deeper in blood—to murder a second girl, and attempt the murder of a third. So much serves Mr. Pettitt for plot; but linked to it is the all-important characterization of the murderess herself, and it is there that the author hopelessly fails. The girl is not treated in terms of the plot itself, as someone who, having blundered into tragedy, involves herself further out of fear and panic. She is presented as a bitter, twisted person who, it would almost seem, only needed such a malign opportunity to set off her homicidal instincts. Far from acting out of panic, she goes about her murdering with cool and brilliant cunning. Hence plot and characterization, far from coalescing, are really at odds with each other.

Indeed, Mr. Pettitt as dramatist is in much the position of his college girl as murderess: having no clear conception of what he wants to show, he has to keep covering his tracks, to throw in one thing here and another thing there in order to justify his inconsistency. His motivations are often clumsy; his "plants" usually shriek aloud. And there are further crudities. The intensity of climactic moments is shattered by the sudden intrusion of comedy lines. In the more relaxed scenes, the sorority girls go in for laboriously bright talk which may resemble actual sorority-house patter but is pretty hard to take.

'NINE GIRLS'

A melodrama in two acts by Wilfrid H. Pettitt; staged by Reginald Denham; setting by John Root; presented at the Longacre Theater on January 13, 1943, by A. H. Woods. The cast:

Jane ..... Maxine Stuart
Frieda ..... Ruth K. Hill
Alice ..... Barbara Bel Geddes
Eve ..... K. T. Stevens
Sharon (Glamour Pants) ..... Mary McCormack
Shirley ..... Marilyn Erskine
Betty (Tennessee) ..... Kayo Copeland
Stella (Shot-put) ..... Irene Dailey
Mary ..... Adele Longmire

NEW YORK SUN
January 14, 1943

'Nine Girls,' a Small Melodrama, Opens at The Longacre Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

A HOMICIDAL school girl moves destructively among her fellows in Wilfrid H. Pettitt's "Nine Girls," which opened at the Longacre last evening. She poisons here and throttles there and in more subtle moments disconnects the steering gear of cars which are about to be driven down precipitous highways. There are agreeable chills to be derived from her murderous efforts, but probably not enough of them.

Mr. Pettitt lays his scene in a sorority's mountain clubhouse and all his characters are attractive youngsters, given to hearty slanging of one another. One of them is known as Glamour Pants and another, of somewhat differing type, as Shot-put. There is a girl communist and a girl from what Mr. Pettitt, who is not sufficiently averse to the obvious, probably calls "the wrong side of the tracks." There is a pretty, fluffy little girl who is not bright enough to save her life; there is a girl physician and a keen-minded young woman who will not accept evidence which fools the off-stage State police.

Very early in the proceedings Mr. Pettitt lets his cat out of the bag, but until the end he leaves his audience to wonder whether the handsome killer will be captured before extermination of the cast is complete. You will worry quite often about a girl named Eve; you will be saddened that the character played so charmingly by Miss Barbara Bel Geddes is so quickly extinguished. And you may shiver a little.

Mr. Pettitt strains credulity now and then, but in general his plot is sufficient. But his dialogue is often wooden and his ribald insults are not always as amusing as he imagines. Except here and there, his characterization is skimpy and there is nothing a menace play needs more than good, sinister characterization. I am afraid that, on the whole, "Nine Girls" is a little undersized, and not only because it is actually very short. Something more substantial should have celebrated A. H. Woods's return to New York play production.

In addition to the attractive Miss Bel Geddes, the cast includes Adele Longmire, who plays with convincing intensity; K. T. Stevens, who is brave amid perils, and Mary McCormack, who finds occasion to do the sleep-walking scene from "Macbeth" and does it nicely.

(Maybe "Macbeth" is really a better play than "Nine Girls," when you come down to it.) You will like the others, too, and wish they had a little more play.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
January 14, 1943

New Murder Melodrama Based on Sex and Death In Coast Sorority House

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH long a custodian of the gaudier drama Effendi Al Woods has not been very active lately but he emerged at the Longacre last night as the producer of "Nine Girls," a murder melodrama by Wilfrid H. Pettitt, concerning sex and assassination in a California sorority house. Its story of a pretty murderess engaged quietly in bumping off her college mates ought to be fascinating, but somehow Mr. Pettitt has failed to write very much of a play on the subject and while such beauteous actresses as K. T. Stevens and Adele Longmire ornament the killings glamorously I'd just as soon see them in a beauty contest, unhampered so to speak, by so many clues.

The Old Master's instinct is quite right, of course, when he assumes that a stageful of beauties in danger and distress ought to be a distracting and solvent sight. With no menfolk on the more dangerous side of the footlights the girls can not only take their hair down, they can pull it, and the result, with a little homicide added, should provide something like a combination of "The Women" and "Rope's End."

But Mr. Pettitt simply isn't up to the bright idea he has found for himself. What he has written is hardly more than an outline for a play (or more likely a scenario for a movie in these days of absent male stars). Even in playing time there isn't enough stuff on the Longacre stage to make a full evening, though it is stretched, with the help of one long intermission, from 8:55 to 10:40 o'clock.

For the sake of those who, willy nilly, are going to see the play I should not, I suppose, betray too much of its secret, though the author does not hide the identity of his murderess very long, and her second job is done carefully and elaborately in full view of the audience. Her original motive is fear of losing her boy friend to her rival, and after that it's the old business of killing others to hide the first.

Since she must be alone with her second victim Mr. Pettitt is obliged to clear the sorority house, high up in the Sierra Nevadas, of its other inmates and his method of doing this is not much more subtle than standing in the wings with a hook to drag the girls off. If they had rushed out in the bitter cold to hold a pillow fight their enforced departure couldn't have seemed much sillier.

Anyway they all come back, and next morning find poor little Alice crumpled up in the coat closet, with a note and everything looking to anybody on earth except an audience, like a suicide. One sharp-eyed sorority-sister isn't taken in by appearances, and the first thing she knows the steering gear of her car is dangerously undone. A pair of gloves with too much grease on them is burned in the fireplace (Clue No. 3) and before the final curtain gets down there is a rough and tumble between the murderess and the amateur sleuth who, to make matters worse, is the lady Borgia's dearest friend. But the killer is trapped in time; there is a dash of poison left over from the last round and so the lovely lady kills herself.

The sagacious Woods has assembled an excellent cast, and the skimpy script is played for more than is in it, under Reginald Denham's direction. Miss Longmire is sultry and suitably lethal, Miss Stevens vivid, Mary McCormack amusing as a collegiate actress with delusions of Shakespeare, Irene Dailey heartily humorous as a buxom athlete and Barbara Bel Geddes poignant and charming as a trusting sister.

Among the carvings on the rough paneling of the sorority lodge, where the action takes place, I noticed the initials "A. H. W." and under them the numerals "404."

To the Broadway initiate this means that this play is Mr. Woods' 404th production.

I'm praying for better luck on the 405th. After all a beginner has got to have a chance.

"Nine Girls"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
January 14, 1943

Soporific Slaughter

By HOWARD BARNES

MURDER has rarely proved less fascinating on the stage than it is in "Nine Girls." The new melodrama at the Longacre features an off-stage killing, an on-stage killing, a near homicide and an imminent suicide. For all of that, it is a singularly obvious and unexciting show. Even though Al Woods, who has been something of an expert at putting slaughter behind footlights, is sponsoring the production; even though it is enacted by an up-and-coming group of ingenues, this Wilfrid H. Pettitt play is a low-voltage shocker.

* * *

As a matter of fact, it is a bit ridiculous. The author has picked a sorority clubhouse in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, of all places, for the scene of his carnage. He has elected personable co-eds as his principals. All that he has overlooked is the little matter of making a murderous rampage plausible and endowing it with some suspense and terror. He gives away the plot before the abbreviated exhibit is half over. Nothing that ensues is calculated to make one take a great deal of interest in whether more co-eds get killed, or the killer herself gets caught.

* * *

It would be perfectly ethical in this instance, I think, to tell you all about the denouement of the Longacre thriller. It would scarcely prove edifying. Suffice it to say that a bottle of prussic acid should not be left lying around a sorority house, particularly in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It is apt to lead to all sorts of dull nonsense. It does in "Nine Girls" for a brief interval. One of the characters remarks: "This would be funny if it weren't so horrible." I say it is neither funny nor horrible.

* * *

It is asking a lot of youngsters to make a melodrama bloom from such arid material as Pettitt has invented. The all-feminine cast of the play is in there trying all the time, but it is not too successful. Adele Longmire is guilty of considerable overacting as the girl from the wrong side of town who hates most of her rich sorority sisters. K. T. Stevens is better as a suspicious amateur in psychology; Barbara Bel Geddes has a few convincing moments as one of the victims, and Mary McCormack makes a couple of valiant attempts to leaven the proceedings with laughter. "Nine Girls" would have stopped a far more experienced company in its tracks. It is a turgid study in violence, without even the conventional components of a horror show.

NEW YORK TIMES
January 14, 1943

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Nine Girls"

By LEWIS NICHOLS

THE redoubtable Al Woods, hero of a thousand battles along Broadway, has come back to town, and that definitely can be set down in the column of good news. Once more the Woods cigar fumes through Times Square, and on the telephone the cheerful voice says "hello, sweetheart," just as though the telephone had been invented for that purpose. What is not such good news is that the drama's happy warrior brought with him from the coast the play called "Nine Girls," which, going on last evening at the Longacre, was the 404th production from the Woods atelier, but not one of the best. To be blunt about it, Wilfrid H. Pettitt's melodrama is one considerably removed from the best.

* * *

Out of Mr. Woods's office, that has been busy for forty years, has come a steady stream of plays about ladies, plays about murder. For this Winter he has combined those two muses, so that "Nine Girls" turns out to be about murder in a sorority clubhouse high in the Sierra Mountains. Mr. Pettitt has written part of it in a smokehouse dialect that suggests that West Lake University does not cater exclusively to cultured refinement, and the rest of it in a purple manner reminiscent of the style of melodrama put on earlier in the career of the master, himself. Mr. Pettitt's characters are not believable, nor are most of their actions; the furies of melodrama must do better than this.

* * *

Mr. Pettitt's nine girls, off on a week-end party, include a murderess, and the audience soon is told which one it is. There are a medical student (her kit carries poison), a graduate, an amateur actress (she studies "Macbeth"), a Communist, two undefined, two newly pledged, an athlete. Outside the wind howls as the murderess, cornered, finds herself forced into other murders or attempted murders, and the talk of sex slows down like a slow freight while the express of melodrama rushed by. The difficulty seems to be that it rushes nowhere in particular and to no unexpected place.

Mr. Woods has acquired a cast which, under other circumstances, would have considerable charm. There is Barbara Bel Geddes, very pretty and engaging, and K. T. Stevens, ditto. There is Adele Longmire in a trying role and making out rather well with most of it, and Mary McCormack, who really acts in one scene, suggesting that the overacting in others was by invitation elsewhere. Ruth K. Hill plays the Communist, and Maxine Stuart does well by the most believable of the roles, that of the medical student. Reginald Denham directed and John Root created the sorority's obviously heavily endowed living room.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
January 14, 1943

"9 Girls" in Old Nevada State, One Was Pizened, That Left 8

"Nine Girls," drama by Wilfred H. Pettitt. Produced by A. H. Woods at the Longacre Theatre, New York, Jan. 13, 1943.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

OLD Trapper Al Woods, a first class thrill and gooseflesh hunter in the old days on Broadway, has been out in California the last several years hoping to lure another box-office melodrama into his bear trap.

It was Trapper Al, you may recall, who snared "The Queen of the White Slaves" early in his career, and brought "The Trial of Mary Dugan" in before the depression got him. In between he bagged a couple hundred major and minor Broadway hits and was quite a fellow.

Now Al is back at the Longacre with a little thrill number written by Wilfred Pettitt. It is called "Nine Girls," for no particular reason, except that is the way they add up on the stage.

It, too, is a melodrama and frankly of the synthetic type. It gives you a murder over the radio in the first scene, adds a poisoning on the stage in the second scene, and then keeps you pretty well interested in the uncovering of the homicidal maniac responsible for both crimes in two additional scenes.

In the Mountains

The deliberateness of the set-up is fairly obvious in "Nine Girls," starting with the introduction of nine sorority sisters weekending in a lonely clubhouse up in the Nevada mountains.

Could happen, but not likely, and certainly not without some explanation. One of the girls, disappointed in love, has bashed in the head of one she believed was her successful rival.

The victim had written a letter to another of the girls which gives the recipient a bit of a clue. The murderer therefore is forced to kill the second girl to protect herself. Which she does, rather brutally.

Now the trick is to keep the story going and the audience in suspense. Because the play has been staged by Reginald Denham, who is skilled in these jobs, the interest is fairly well sustained. The eight girls left to work out the plot are good actresses.

But I'm afraid the audience is always conscious of being used as an audience, and never sufficiently fooled really to believe Mr. Pettitt's story.

Barbara Bumped

Of course I might be a mite prejudiced. Any playwright who kills off Barbara Bel Geddes in the first act of any play is no friend of mine. Probably Barbara enjoys the experience. It gives her a chance to employ her effective tremolo and to act with the technical assurance that promises continued growth.

Adele Longmire, playing the evil one, also has a fine chance to prove her quality, which is definite and intelligently projected. K. T. Stevens is likewise sympathetically cast, she playing the detecktative in the last act and asking all the troublesome questions.

In addition there are Mary McCormack, Ruth K. Hill, Maxine Stuart, Marilyn Erskine, Irene Dailey, and Kayo Copeland from Dalton, Ga. (Hi, Kayo!) and they all do well. The audience liked them a lot.

John Root spent time, money and good judgment on the set. Mr. Denham is expert, as noted, in staging mysteries. Some day some producer will think to engage him to do a thorough rewriting job, too. That will help.

"Nine Girls"

NEW YORK POST
January 14, 1943

"Nine Girls," One a Murderess, Spend a Week-end in the Mountains

By WILELLA WALDORF

WILFRID H. PETTITT has an outline for a psychological thriller in "Nine Girls," produced by A. H. Woods last night at the Longacre. Nothing more.

Mr. Woods is returning to the Broadway producing ranks after an absence of several years in California. It seems like old times to have him back, and we should like to be able to write a glowing report on his new venture.

But it's the old story at the Longacre. Acting and production are far superior to the play.

Mr. Pettitt's idea is not a bad one. He has been imagining what would happen if nine sorority sisters from a Western college were to spend a week-end in a mountain cabin just after one of them has committed a murder.

The victim is a fellow student and friend of most of those present, and the author is not interested in making a mystery of the situation. He identifies the murderess shortly after the curtain has gone up, and proceeds to show how one murder leads to another, and almost to a third.

Playwright No Technician

But he has failed to develop his idea beyond a skimpy plot outline. The play, in two acts, did not begin until nearly nine o'clock and was over at 10:35. The intermission was a long one.

It is a pity that Mr. Pettitt did not get to work on his sketch with a collaborator and make a genuine thriller out of "Nine Girls." He is apparently intrigued by the psychological study of his murderess, and he has a certain amount of success with the incidental comedy and college-girl chatter of the week-enders.

As it is, however, despite everything Reginald Denham can do as director, and the services of a good all-feminine company, there is little suspense in the play, and while a scene here and there threatens to work up something approaching horror, it is generally perfunctory and sometimes rather foolish.

After all, Broadway has on its boards two dramas of the style "Nine Girls" would like to be—"Angel Street" and "Uncle Harry"—from which an aspiring author of melodrama should be able to learn a great deal about the technique of the murder play in which the interest centers in the mentality of the killer rather than in the usual who-done-it mystery.

Both "Angel Street" and "Uncle Harry" take their time, piling up suspense and forboding until the audience is ready to snap from the sheer nervous tension. "Nine Girls" rushes through its undeveloped scenario without deliberation or finesse. The author never got around to writing his play. He merely tinkers with an idea for a little while.

Miss Longmire Heads a Good Company

Disappointing as it is, however, "Nine Girls" is not a total loss. Once again we were impressed by the decidedly interesting personality, and the remarkable quality as an actress of Adele Longmire, who looks like a young Katharine Cornell, and whom we remember vividly in "Old Acquaintance."

Where Miss Longmire has spent her time since then we don't know, but presume she has been in the movies. She is a young actress who should mean a great deal to the theatre in time to come, and we can only hope a role will turn up that will keep her here, where she belongs, instead of sending her back to the coast.

K. T. Stevens still seems a trifle mechanical in her playing at times, but she is a likeable person on the stage and she gets better with each appearance. Young Barbara Bel Geddes, too, has come along beautifully since "Out of the Frying Pan" two seasons ago. She has a scene with Miss Longmire in the first act that is one of the best sequences in the production.

Maxine Stuart as the medical student knows her way about the stage, while Ruth K. Hill, as the Communist, Mary McCormack as the budding actress elegantly nicknamed "Glamor Pants," and Irene Dailey as the athlete are often amusing in their not-so-artless boarding-school fashion.

Marilyn Erskine and Kayo Copeland filled in nicely as the two "pledges." Nothing is so indicative of the fact that time is rushing by than the rapid growing up of child actresses into ingenues as the seasons pass. Miss Erskine was but recently a mere brat. Now she's a sophisticated young lady.

The nine girls are so talented that we are genuinely sorry Mr. Pettitt couldn't develop his idea into something a bit more effective in the theatre. Too bad Mr. Denham didn't hop in and do a re-write job while directing. He has written some pretty artful thrillers himself. "Ladies in Retirement," for instance.

NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
January 14, 1943

Nice Girls, Melodrama, Opens at the Longacre

By BURTON RASCOE

BACK in the Twenties, when Al Woods was the most sensationally successful producer in New York, with 23 shows on Broadway and on the road in one season, Samuel Hoffenstein, the poet, who was then his Boswell and public relations counsel, told me that if there was a pistol shot or a bed in the first act of any play submitted to him Al would buy it without reading any further.

Playwrights whose scruples were impure, said Sam, got on to this and as a result the commodious "icebox," in what were then Mr. Woods' quarters in the Eltinge, was filled to the brim with plays, unread beyond the first act, which Mr. Woods had bought and on each of which he was renewing the option every six months. This, alleged Sam, was one of the contributing factors to Mr. Woods' eventual bankruptcy: for playwrights were coming in nearly every day for their $500 checks for option renewals and getting them.

I am wondering if the thing Mr. Woods put on last night, called Nine Girls, to signalize his return to Broadway after a long absence, isn't one of those plays whose second act he still hasn't read and that has been subjected to about 15 years of inadequate refrigeration. For not only has Nine Girls got a murder scene in the first act and, for good measure, a lot of bedroom smut of the era of Mr. Woods' Getting Gertie's Garter and Up in Mabel's Room, but it also has an exceedingly gamy odor as of something inauspiciously disinterred.

Once Convulsed George V

Although the time is alleged to be the present and the place a mountain clubhouse of a contemporary college sorority, and there are some togs and dialogue, a radio and the sound of an aeroplane to create that illusion, the technique and tone even antedate Parlor, Bedroom and Bath and The Trial of Mary Dugan, and go back to Mr. Woods' early, or 14th St. period when he was making a fortune out of Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl, Fast Life in New York and Secret Service Sam. If this really is a new melodrama by Wilfred H. Pettitt, as described in the program, I, as an old friend and admirer of Mr. Woods, would caution him on his return to producing to give up his method of selecting plays and start reading second acts.

Broadway has never had a more colorful, more generous or more beloved character than Al Woods, and that is why I was pained last night that he had not come back to us with something as good, say, as his London production of Potash and Perlmutter, which caused his star guest, the late George V, to laugh so hard (Mr. Wood told me) that His Majesty kept doubling over the dusty railing of the royal box until his shirt front made him look like a zebra. . . . As it is, I am only happy to report it is not Mr. Woods' money that is going to be lost on this dismal venture (If my guess about it is right), but the money of the motion picture company that backed the show. The movie people, nowadays, can afford it.

I had rather not report on this play. I had rather pretend it never happened. Besides, the girls in it are so nice, so pretty and so talented it is a shame they are stuck, even momentarily, with the shameful task of emitting silly, gratuitous profanity and cheap, dirty quips and going through fantastically incredible motions. You feel all the time as though the girls should have their mouths washed out with laundry soap. If Mr. Pettitt tells me that is the way modern sorority girls talk, I am for burning down all the women's colleges and co-educational institutions; for, obviously, the schools are not educating and refining the minds of the girls, but polluting and cheapening them. Whatever Mr. Pettitt may say, I seriously doubt that college girls are as sexually promiscuous and as cheap-minded about it as all the girls in this play, except the murderess and two pledges, are portrayed as being.

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A Prim Murderess

As the play opens nine sorority girls are about to return home from a week end at their mountain clubhouse in the Sierras, when a report comes over the radio that one of their classmates has been foully murdered and mutilated. The audience is apprised almost at once that the murderess is the primmest one of the nine, the only one not flippantly foul-mouthed or indecently catty. She (played by Adele Longmire) is a girl "from across the tracks" who has murdered a wealthy and snobbish classmate to prevent her from marrying a rich and cultivated young man whom the murderess wants to marry for security. There are but two acts to the play, and through the next three scenes Miss Longmire is obliged to murder another girl who has received a telltale letter, and twice attempt the murder of still another girl (K. T. Stevens) whose deductions as an amateur detective get too hot, before she is finally trapped and forced to confess. Her confession is the hollowest ever devised for the stage.

Miss Longmire is required by the director to stare like a maniac throughout most of the play. K. T. Stevens and Barbara Bel Geddes managed miraculously to appear natural in unnatural parts; Maxine Stuart, Mary McCormack and Irene Dailey had horrible roles with which they could do nothing, try as they might. The cherubic face of Marilyn Erskine saying one line was the only faintly bright spot of the evening. Some of the first nighters laughed where the author intended they should. They should have blushed instead.